

**When Outsiders Become Insiders
June 26, 2011**

**John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church**

**Psalm 13
Acts 10:1-16
Acts 10:17-35**

**"I truly understand that God shows no partiality."
Acts 10: 34 (NRSV)**

Faith, when it comes down to it, is an often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, "What is God doing? Where on earth is God going now?"

**William H. Willimon
*Biblical Commentary for Preaching and Teaching:
Acts of the Apostles***

Startle us, O God, as you startled disciples long ago with new ideas, new openness, new acceptance and love, which transcend old traditions and ancient barriers. Startle us with a love that transcends even our own long-held assumptions. Startle us, Spirit of the Living God, unpredictable, surprising, and open us, each one, for the word you have for us today. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

He sat in my living room with his head in his hands, crying. He was a close friend. We met early every summer Saturday morning to play tennis. An Elder in the congregation I served before this one. A wonderful wife, two great children, nice home. He was a successful executive, on business in Chicago. He called and said he needed to talk to me. We took our coffee into the living room, sat down, and he said, "Something's wrong. Something's very wrong. I think I'm gay." I was stunned. It was twenty-five years ago. The thought had never occurred to me. I grew up with the same stereotypes about sexual orientation as everybody else. We never said "sexual orientation," of course. We used much more cruel, meaner words than that. My assumption was that homosexuality was an aberration, an abnormality. When, years later, I was a minister and the church first suggested that we ought to think about this topic, I softened my assumptions and concluded that it was a kind of illness that would respond to treatment.

Here, sitting in my living room, was a challenge to my assumptions. It was clear that he shared those assumptions at first. He had reached out for help. He had gone to physicians, psychiatrists; he even signed up for and attended a program that promised to fix him, change him, reorient his sexuality. Nothing had worked. He was desperate, and he was sitting in my living room with his head in his hands. He couldn't bear the thought of telling his wife, leaving his marriage. What would his children think? He was a devout Christian. What would his church think? "What does Jesus think?" he asked me. "I can't continue like this, living a lie," he said. "Maybe the only thing to do is end my life."

We talked more. I mostly listened. With the help of another therapist, he gradually learned to think differently, to stop trying to "fix" the problem, learned to accept who he was. He told his wife and children, and, as I expected, they were supportive. And with the support of a wise pastor, he continued his leadership in his church. Eventually he found someone he loved and wanted to spend the rest of his life with, which he did, until he died of the AIDS he had contracted somewhere in the middle of all this.

That is not a unique story. But it was the day that my mind finally changed. I knew him and respected him so deeply that I simply could not dismiss his experience and return to the safety of my assumptions. I thought and read everything I could about the subject and prayed and began the difficult and painful task of acknowledging that I had been wrong; my assumptions were wrong. What I was told all my life was wrong. I changed my mind. You might say I was converted. And what did it for me finally was not political correctness, not social liberalism, but a Bible story I knew well but hadn't thought much about. It's in the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles.

I read a fascinating book recently, *Why Christianity Happened*. The author, James Crossley, sets out to explore the historical, sociological, and political reasons why a tiny Jewish sect in the first century not only survived but spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire, put down roots, and in the relatively short time span of three centuries became the official religion of the empire itself. Crossley suggests that among the reasons were Roman roads—a new system of transportation and communication, a common language—and a growing interest in monotheism. I found it all very interesting but ultimately not very convincing. There is something else going on, some other energy—power, if you will—to cause this paradox that leaves historians scratching their heads. We're talking, of course, about the Holy Spirit, one of my favorite definitions of which is "the Energy of God."

The story that prompted my own change of mind is about conversion—two conversions, actually. There are three characters in this story: Cornelius, a soldier, an officer in the Roman Army, a Gentile who will be converted to Jesus Christ and become part of the church; Peter, a disciple of Jesus, a

leader of the community of believers living in Jerusalem, a Jew, who also will undergo a conversion in regard to his new Gentile friend; And the real hero of this story, the one working behind the scenes to convert the other two characters, the character William Willimon in a commentary on this story calls “the gracious and prodding One.”

Cornelius, who lives in Caesarea, is a good and generous man, a God-fearing Gentile. Cornelius has a dream in which he is instructed to send to Joppa for a man by the name of Peter, a Jew, a follower of Jesus. At the same time, Peter, who is up on the rooftop saying his midday prayers and, by the way, getting very hungry, also has a dream. A sheet is lowered out of heaven, a big tarp, and on it are all kinds of birds and animals, none of which Peter is allowed to eat because of the dietary laws of his religion. A voice says, “Eat, Peter.” Peter is horrified. “No way am I eating any of those. They’re unclean. The law says so. They are unfit for human consumption.” Peter is stubbornly faithful to his religion’s assumptions. The Holy Spirit is even more stubborn. Three times he has the dream.

Just then, the party Cornelius has sent arrives. Peter invites them in to stay the night. He’s already beginning to break the law. The next morning, after breakfast, they set out for Caesarea—the soldier, the slaves, Peter, and a small entourage of the curious, who want to see what will happen when Peter, the Jew, arrives at the home of Cornelius, the Gentile.

Peter and all the first followers of Jesus were Jews. It never occurred to them to be anything else. They have not yet started to call themselves Christians or to use the word “church”; they assume that they are a small group within Judaism, and that if you want to join them and be part of the movement, you must become a Jew first, with all that entails: the law, the dietary restrictions, circumcision even. Will Willimon says that though we are still wondering whether Jews can become Christians, the real question for the early church was can Gentiles get in.

When Peter arrives, he announces that he really shouldn’t be here, exposed to Gentile uncleanliness, but he’s had that dream, three times, including the voice that told him not to call anything unclean that God has created. Cornelius, in the meantime, is on knees, clutching Peter’s legs, overwhelmed with gratitude and, clearly, full of the Spirit of God. So Peter baptizes him and suddenly a door opens. This new thing, whatever it is, is open to all. There are no racial, ethnic, religious boundaries. Gentiles are welcome too. Wonder of wonders (see Willimon) the grace of God in Jesus Christ accepts all, embraces all, even those formerly regarded as unclean.

That is the story that sealed the deal for me about my friend and the whole matter of who is an insider and an outsider in the church and in the sight of God.

In the meantime, my church was having its own struggle with the issue. In 1973 some Presbyterians in New York asked if an openly gay or lesbian person could be ordained to the ministry or to the offices of Deacon and Elder. The matter was nowhere mentioned in any of the church's rules and policies. The answer came back from headquarters, called "Definitive Guidance": no, you can't do that. But the question wouldn't go away; it kept coming up. So in 1993 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) said let's study the matter for three years and then in 1996 we'll come to some resolution about it.

People in the church who were absolutely opposed to the idea got together, formed an organization, the Coalition, to make sure the church didn't change its mind. As the 1996 General Assembly approached, there was a lot of talk about the subject. I decided that I could not sit on the sidelines. So I decided to run for Moderator of the General Assembly—"stand for Moderator" is the way Presbyterians say it. There were many other issues before the national church, but this was by far the most controversial and potentially divisive. I believed and said that I thought the church could live with diversity on the issue. I had become convinced that sexual orientation and practice alone should not prohibit a man or woman, otherwise qualified, from being an ordained minister or officer in our church, that we should trust congregations and presbyteries, the bodies that ordain clergy, to make faithful and responsible decisions. I won the election, but my position on ordination did not. I presided over the General Assembly that voted to resolve the issue by putting into the church's constitution a provision that specifically forbade the ordination of anyone other than those living in a marriage of a man and woman, or chastity in singleness. The decision was celebrated by part of our church and lamented by part. For many, it was a heartbreaking decision that continued and made official the tradition of exclusion and rejection. I was clear that I did not personally agree with the decision, but as Moderator of the whole church I would do what I could to interpret the decision fairly and do everything possible to hold the church together. The Moderator travels widely. I visited 70 or so of the church's 170 Presbyteries and hundreds of congregations. I preached in a different Presbyterian pulpit on all but a handful of Sundays, when I very happily—gleefully—came home to be here. During that year I met and heard from people who were furious with me for my position and let me know it in no uncertain terms. And I met and heard from heartbroken Presbyterians, lifelong gay and lesbian Presbyterians who had been told that they were not fit for office in their churches, parents of children who no longer felt welcome in their own church, grandparents shaken to the core by what their beloved church had said about their grandchildren. I held their grief in my heart, and still do.

When my one-year term was over, I helped form an organization to work for the deletion of that prohibition and to work for the unity of the church, the Covenant Network. This year, fifteen years later, the 219th General Assembly deleted the prohibition and replaced it with new ordination standards requiring candidates to “submit, in all their life, joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ” and instructing the church to consider the candidates’ gifts, calling, qualifications, and commitments and to be guided by scripture in deciding to ordain or not to ordain.

Some Presbyterians are so unhappy they have left the church. One hundred congregations have left. More are trying to find a way to stay but continue to dissent from the new guidelines and distance themselves from the rest of us. I have pledged myself to fellow Presbyterians, whose faith and conscience leads them to different conclusions from mine, to find a way to honor their own conscience but to remain in the church. I believe deeply that the church needs their faith and witness and voice just as it needs mine.

This is complicated. In some ways the culture is way ahead on this issue. The New York legislature just made gay marriage legal. Our Roman Catholic and evangelical brothers and sisters are opposed to anything that might be construed as acceptance of homosexuality as “normal.”

I know that not all the members and friends of our community are of one mind on this. I know many people have many unanswered questions. I know there are some for whom my position is a source of consternation, if not embarrassment. So I wanted to be clear about where I stand and why. And for those who want further resources, I commend a book *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. There are copies available by contacting Barbara Cleveland; we will order more if needed.

I want to say a few words about the book and author, Jack Rogers. Jack is a conservative, evangelical scholar with a PhD in theology from the Free University of Amsterdam. He taught theology for years at Fuller Seminary, the premier evangelical seminary in the country. We’re about the same age and grew up with the same stereotypes. He says his opposition to homosexuality was “reflexive,” simply part of his intellectual and spiritual equipment. When he was asked one time to do a thoughtful, scholarly analysis of the topic, his assumptions, like mine, were challenged. So, consummate scholar that he is, he took a sabbatical and devoted it to a thorough study and analysis of what the church has believed about the topic, what the Bible says and does not say about same-sex relationships, and how and why the church has changed its mind on other issues about which it was absolutely certain—race and the role of women in the church and society.

His section on the eight biblical passages cited to support opposition to full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians and same-sex relationships is particularly helpful. Jacks digs deep and observes that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, for instance, is not sexual, but economic and social, and when the incident is cited elsewhere in the Bible, the sins mentioned are not sexual, but greed, inhospitality, injustice, idolatry.

Jesus never mentioned the topic. In the few New Testament passages that do, Jack explains, the original Greek is not at all clear, and he calls attention to the scholarly consensus that it is not responsible to read into the New Testament modern concepts of consensual same-sex faithful partnerships. St. Paul never heard of such a thing but did know and condemn the appalling Greek custom of older men forcing themselves on adolescent boys.

There is precedent for the church changing its mind, particularly the Protestant church. For 200 years the church was absolutely certain that people of African descent were inferior intellectually, morally, and spiritually, that slavery was condoned and part of God's plan and ultimately good for the slaves themselves. The church said it; biblical scholars and theologians quoted scripture and wrote books about it right up into the twentieth century.

The church was equally certain that women were inferior, weak, irresponsible, and incapable of leadership. New Testament scholars cited biblical passages to prove the point. Eve, after all, was the source of all human sin, "the devil's gateway," the ancient theologian Tertullian said. Women were "weaker vessels," nineteenth-century Presbyterians said (and when I read things like that I think of Serena Williams), "ornamental womanhood" was to complement the male role by its "radiant presence."

The church has changed its mind before, under the guidance of scripture and, I believe, with the steady pressure, the gracious prodding, of God.

After the Cornelius-Peter incident, the Christian church gradually separated from its parent, Judaism, and went into all the world, eventually opening its arms and heart to the entire human race, transcending every ancient barrier and boundary and border, affirming all—black and white and brown and yellow, male and female, rich and poor, gay and straight, always praying and working for the kingdom, the one, universal family of God.

Willimon says, "This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprise and new implications of the gospel, which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us

something we could not have seen on our own.” That is my experience in this and other matters.

“Faith,” Willimon says, and I have found it to be true in my own life, “is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves ‘What is God doing? Where on earth is God going now?’”

In the final analysis, it is about insiders and outsiders. In the final analysis, every one of us—Peter, Cornelius, my friend, you and I—come to God without our professional credentials, our advanced degrees, accomplishments and successes, without anything to commend us other than that we are God’s children, all of us, created, loved by God, accepted by God, surrounded and embraced by God’s amazing grace.

We come, as the old hymn puts it, “Just as I am” and the promise, the assurance of 2,000 years of history is that God, in loving us, will change us, recreate us, convert us into the men and women he intended, until everyone, every one of us, every outsider, is an insider.

Amen.